Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict

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According to a NATO conflict scenario, Syria and Iraq execute a joint invasion of Turkey in 2010. This invasion occurs against the background of a severe three-year drought in Iraq and Syria, ascribed to Turkey's water policies, and an unstable political situation in the region.[1]According to an Uppsala Model UN scenario, meanwhile, Turkey and Iraq come to the brink of war after a failed attempt by an illegal organization from Iraq to explode one of Turkey's dams. Iraq condemns the assault but accuses Turkey of denying the country access to the water. Turkey blames the Iraqi government for the attack, demands the arrest of those responsible and threatens to cut water supplies completely if Iraq does not comply with its demands. Forces are mobilized and war looms.[2]

These scenarios are based on the potential for armed conflict over water in this part of the Middle East, born of past experience. Clearly, there is an inherent risk of hostilities, with the Tigris and Euphrates rising in Turkish territory (in the Anti-Taurus mountain region) before descending southwards through Syria and Iraq (to the Persian Gulf).[3]This gives Turkey effective control over the water resources of its southern neighbors, with whom political relations have long been problematic in an area of varied and ongoing tensions. A conflict did suddenly become a very real possibility in 1990, when Iraq and Syria thought Turkey had deliberately cut off their water supplies, as they simultaneously faced a serious decrease in water flow (the brewing conflict, however, was offset by another: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait). Today, the situation is heating up again. Iraq is suffering from serious water-supply shortages and locked in the deadly embrace of several armed organizations vying for power. If this were not enough, Turkey commenced another round of dam construction in the area this year. Primarily conceived as part of its counter insurgency strategy against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) (to which the project contributes in various ways, outlined below), this involves turning dams into military means, and thus into potential objects of contention. The politicization of dam construction is well-known. The World Bank and IMF have supported such large-budget projects, which are criticized as relatively low-return and environmentally destructive. However, the targeted usage of such schemes for overtly political purposes, resulting in their objectification as instruments in a political struggle, represents a rather different and less common spatial intervention. This article will discuss dams as contentious constructions with the potential to catalyze violent conflict in the region.

IMPLICATIONS OF GAP

Tensions between Turkey and Iraq are ratcheting up. In the midst of a severe water-supply shortage in early 2009, on May 12 the Iraqi parliament pressed its government to demand a greater share of water from its neighbor Turkey. The Iraqi MPs claimed that as a result of Turkey's infrastructure work in the river basin of the Euphrates and Tigris, spring water reserves in Iraq had dropped to a total of 11 billion cubic meters, compared to 40 billion cubic meters only three years ago. Iraqi experts claim that rainfall had not been below normal levels and that the shortages had been created by Turkey, which was cutting off water flows while filling its newly constructed dams on the Euphrates. This then led to ongoing supply restrictions. The shortage of water in Iraq is leading to environmental disaster (including a draining and salination of the marshes in the south of the country) and displacement of its peasant population. In its resolution, the Baghdad lawmakers determined to block all agreements with Turkey unless their country be given a more equitable share of the available water supply. MP Karim al-Yaqubi, a member of the parliamentary committee on water, told Reuters: “[The] Iraqi parliament voted today to compel the government to include an article in any agreement signed with neighbors to ensure Iraq gets a fair share of water. If it does not, it will not be voted on.”[4]

The decision by the Iraqi MPs follows a longstanding disagreement. Iraq accuses Turkey of choking the Euphrates and the Tigris, a struggle over water resources and access to them that was set in motion by the Turkish decision to embark on the Southeast Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*, GAP). Launched with the construction of the Keban Dam in 1975, the GAP is now a “multi-sector and integrated regional development effort.”[5] Spread over nine provinces in the southeast of Turkey (Adıyaman, Batman, Diyarbakır, Antep, Kilis, Siirt, Urfa, Mardin, and Şırnak), it envisages the construction of 22 dams, 19 power plants and hundreds of kilometers of irrigation canals. In quantitative spatial terms, the GAP region has a surface area of more than 75,000 square kilometers, corresponding to almost 10 percent of the total surface of Turkey. The 1.7 million hectares of arable land served by the project is about 20 percent of the total irrigable land in the country, and the population in the region is about 7 million people, approximately 10 percent of the total population of the Republic of Turkey.

In 1975, Syria and Iraq had come to the brink of war when the building of both the Keban Dam in Turkey and the Tahba Dam in Syria combined with a drought to create serious problems in Iraq. In 1989, Syrian MIGs shot down a Turkish survey plane belonging to the Land Registry Directorate, allegedly in relation to water-related tensions.[6] Turkey mobilized its forces in January 1990, when it cut the Euphrates to fill the reservoir for the Atatürk Dam, temporarily reducing the flow of water into Syria and Iraq by 75 percent. Iraq had threatened to bomb the dam, which led Turkey to threaten to cut off the water flow to Syria and Iraq completely.

Over the years, Iraq and Syria have filed numerous claims accusing Turkey of causing a water shortage. Farmers in Iraq’s south face serious difficulties, driving many to despair. Alewi al-Shimmari, a rice farmer living in Diwaniyah, south of Baghdad, says: “More than 50 percent of families working as farmers have left their villages and gone to the city.” Al-Shimmari used to grow rice throughout his 40 hectare farm, but the drought has reduced it to only 5 hectares. “Lands that once were green farms are now turned to desert,” he notes.[7]Syria has also accused Turkey of effectively releasing contaminated water, arguing Rivers, that water cutbacks had dangerously increased concentrations of fecal matter on irrigated fruits and vegetables, leading to an acute outbreak of cholera.[8]Contamination and increased levels of salinity >in the rivers have also contributed, it is argued, to a sharp reduction in fishing, an important source of food and livelihood.[9]

The construction of dams and irrigation tunnels was originally set to be completed by 2010, but this has now been delayed by several years, if not decades, due to lack of funds. The funding problems are directly related to Turkey’s dispute with Syria and Iraq over the rights to water resources. The World Bank has refused to provide loans because Turkey did not comply with the international standards for such projects. Most important, Turkey has not reached an agreement with its two southern neighbors, the other “owners” of the water in the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, on sharing the water, principally because Turkey had considered this neither necessary nore desirable former President Turgut Ozal put it: "We don't tell Arabs what to do with their oil, so we don't accept any suggestion from them about what to do with our water." [10]

Nevertheless, Turkey did sign agreements with Iraq (1984) and Syria (1987) promising a minimum water flow of 500 cubic meters per second in the Euphrates. Tensions did not end with the signing of the agreements themselves, as these are bilateral between Turkey and its neighbors, while a tripartite agreement among the three countries is needed to deal properly with the water distribution. Also, it is not so much the average annual flow that is important but the flow of water in the dry summer growing season. A final complicating factor is that the parties do not really know how much water they share and need to divide. The flow varies greatly as a result of seasonal and year-on-year differences in snow and rainfall, compounded now by distortions as a result of the many dams and extended irrigation systems. Closer collaboration and painstaking extended efforts are needed in order to first assess the flows of water and the needs of the different parties over time and then negotiate a fair, feasible and transparent distribution system.

In the perspective of growing tensions, it must be considered a positive sign that Turkey, Syria and Iraq held a crisis summit in Ankara in 2009 (September 3) specifically to discuss the issue of drought in the region and the water flows in the Euphratesand Tigris. In the context of improved relations between Turkey and its eastern neighbors,[11] the summit gave some ground for optimism. Unfortunately, no breakthrough was accomplished. The Iraqi minister of water resources, Latif Rashid, emphasized again that his country is facing mass migration, especially from southern parts of the country, as a consequence of both the diminishing water flows into Iraq from the two rivers and the current drought. “The situation in Iraq has never been as dire as it has been in the past two years,” he asserted.[12] Yet a request for more water was diplomatically turned down by his Turkish counterpart, Taner Yildiz, who, while acknowledging “the need for water in our neighbors,” maintained that Turkey could not “allow our own water and energy management to run into problems."[13] In short, while any negotiation may be preferred to a stand-off, the immediate outcome of the crisis summit was that national viewpoints were repeated, narrow self-interest prevailed and no concrete steps were taken to come to anything like a tripartite agreement. Water flows to Turkey's neighbors will not be increased.

THE KURDISH ISSUE

Although GAP started as an energy and irrigation project to utilize the potential of the rich water and land resources in the region, the project also turned into a key element in the Turkish state's tackling of the Kurdish issue.

First, Turkey used its water resources as a trump card in dealing at a transitional level with the PKK, an outlawed organization fighting for Kurdish rights in the region. This is especially pertinent since the "borders" of the Kurdish homeland cross today's national boundaries of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, which thus hold ambiguous meaning to Kurdish fighters as they both ignore and make use of them. In addition, Kurdish organizations have manipulated the animosities between the state-actors in the region, in particular Turkey and Syria. The Turkish strategy here in deploying its water resources to political advantage is revealed by the double agreement that Turkey and Syria signed in 1987. In one part of the agreement, Turkey guaranteed a minimum annual flow of 500 cubic meters per second from the Euphrates basin to Syria; in the other, Syria promised to put an end to the activities within its borders of the PKK and radical leftist organizations considered by Turkey as terrorists .

In the years that followed, several high-ranking Turkish politicians linked the water issue to Syria's dealing with its PKK guests, or infiltrators. In 1992,Turkey's President Özal stated that his country would not inflict damage to Iraq and Syria if they cooperated in dealing with the PKK. In the same year, Prime Minister Demirel stated, "It is impossible to engage in negotiations over water while allowing terrorism." Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin added, "The water issue should not be thought of as so important. If we have good relations with one another, we will not cause problems."[14] The water issue was thus used to press Syria to end its tacit support of, or at least non-intervention in, PKK activities in its border region with Turkey, a strategy that eventually contributed to PKKleader Abdullah Öcalan's leaving the country (he had, in fact, based himself and PKK operations in Syria since 1979). Turkey has also, moreover, been accused of offering Syria water in return for peace negotiations with Israel, an accusation denied in 2008 by Foreign Minister Ali Babacan.[15]

A second way in which Turkey used its water resources in dealing with the Kurdish issue was at the level of economic development. It was around 1990 that GAP was expanded into the field of development, against the background of the rise of the PKK. The authorities had stood amazed at the massive support for the PKK, and the Regional Development Administration, established to facilitate the expansion of GAP into development, engaged in research that had to come with an explanation. According to Nilay Özok,[16] the government searched for a more thorough understanding of the process by which millions of "mountain Turks" (as the Kurds were then referred to in official discourse) had turned into Kurds. The political problems were understood as deriving from economics in a very general way. Because the region was relatively poor, dissatisfaction and disaffection were pervasive, and the terrorists were able to channel these sentiments to their own ends. Therefore, the logic went, develop the Kurdish region economically and the "so-called" Kurdish issue would take care of itself. Simultaneously, it was thought that GAP could turn Kurds into Turks. GAP-employed social scientists argued that the introduction of modern, irrigation-based agriculture and market integration would bring a new lifestyle to the region. The importance of tribal relations and extended families would diminish, while dependency on state institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture would increase. In the course of this process, tribal Kurds would turn into modern Turks.

The approach was handicapped by several flaws. First of all, attempts to modernize agriculture did not merely produce gains, as they also increased inequalities. Large landowners were said to benefit more than small ones. Second, as a result of bad irrigation practices, large areas had to cope with salination problems. A. W. Van den Ban, a Dutch expert in agricultural extension, was forthright in his concern. "I would like to see a major increase in the size of the agricultural extension service of the Ministry of Agriculture and a large improvement in the quality of their work," he stated, "but it seems to be very difficult, if not impossible, to realize such a change." Van den Ban[17]predicts a further degradation of soil under the influence of prevalent irrigation practices, resulting in a loss of livelihood and income.

At the economic level, therefore, the fact that economic gains do not seem to have transferred to an evaporation of the Kurdish political agenda again testifies to the very basic misapprehension of the issue by the Turkish authorities. Political grievances felt so keenly that a "war of liberation" might break out cannot really be expected to dissipate in the trickle-down of material prosperity. The most important flaw, however, was that the authorities simply could not imagine that a person could be both modern and a Kurd at the same time. In the Kemalist-oriented imagination, it is either traditional and Kurd, or modern and Turk. This illustrates the difficulties the authorities have had in accepting a Kurdish identity in modern Turkey.

Third, Turkish strategy vis-à-vis water and the southeast involves an element of cultural destruction. This may be a rather common criticism of large-scale dam projects in areas of natural beauty occupied by local or indigenous peoples, but it takes on a new, sharper meaning in the context of the conflict between the Turkish state and its Kurdish minority. Several dams have been highly criticized for their negative impact on the cultural heritage of the Kurdish region and the population living there. Particularly notable is the Ilisu Dam, planned to drown the ancient city of Hasankeyf and its surroundings. International NGOs such as the London-based Kurdistan Human Rights Project have campaigned against the construction of the dam, criticizing the project for its negative social and cultural impact, including the forced displacement of villagers and the erasure of ancient culture in the Kurdish region.[18]The dam would lead to a cultural cleansing of ancient history. The threat was taken up by the World Monuments Fund, which listed the city on its 2008 Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites worldwide.[19]Due to the campaign, Germany, Austria and Switzerland withdrew their export credit guarantees for the construction of this dam in June 2009, leaving Turkey deprived of funds but determined to continue.

The fourth and most recent development in Turkey's strategy comprises the deployment of its water as a physical barrier against insurgent activity. On July 11, 2009, the government of Turkey announced the construction of another project to utilize water resources, one that involves the construction of eleven dams in the Hakkari and Sirnak provinces along the border with Iraq and Iran. These dams are not constructed for hydroelectric power purposes. Neither will they be used for irrigation, since the area is sparsely populated. Most of its rural population was displaced in the course of the war with the PKK during the 1990s. These additional dams are being constructed as a wall of water, with the sole purpose of making it difficult for PKK guerrilla fighters to penetrate Turkey's borders. According to the authorities, the mountainous region, with its many caves, contains many cross-border trails. These are to be elongated dams, therefore, constructed in ribbon formation. With preparations for their building already started, this project will replace earlier ideas for a five-meter-high concrete wall along this border. According to Duran Kalkan, a high-ranking leader of the PKK, the Turkish army is already constructing new roads and new bases along the border: "There is a high level of military activity [along the border] within the context of the new projects to construct dams." According to Sevahir Bayındır, MP for the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), these dams will have a negative impact on the economy and ecology in the region. He referred to the plan as being born from a "dangerous mentality." With the construction of dams as military objects, Turkey is exposing them as targets, too.

UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS

The European Union is following closely Turkey's plans and actions to utilize its water resources. In a resolution of March 12, 2008, on Turkey's progress report, the European Parliament (EP) commented on GAP's "social, ecological, cultural and geopolitical consequences, including those on the water supplies of the neighboring countries, Iraq and Syria, and calls on the [Turkish] government to take these issues fully into consideration, to protect the rights of the population affected and to ensure close cooperation with local and regional authorities."[20]However, a European parliamentary delegation led by Satu Hassi, a former minister in Finland now in the European Greens, suggested in the same year that Turkey is ignoring advice and instead engaging in power politics: "The delegation got the impression that Turkey wants to turn many of these dams to existing facts before joining the EU."[21] Insofar as Turkey is on a track towards eventual EU membership, the EU thus finds itself in the process of inheriting the conflict potential embedded in the will be stored in a series of dams with the dams. These dams are not only filled with sole intention of creating a barrier, further water, but with disputes and strife, too.

At the crisis summit held in 2009, Turkey was not inclined to give Iraq and Syria the share of water they requested. Moreoever, the future share of these two countries will be further threatened by Turkey's decision to build yet more dams. While, along the border with Iraq, water will be stored in a series of dams with the sole intention of creating a barrier, further to the south, drought is already turning fertile land into desert. As long as Turkey continues to see itself as the rightful owner of the water in the river basins, doing as it pleases, escalation and international conflict over water resources looms. The NATO and Uppsala Model UN scenarios are fictional, but not unrealistic.

[1]Frederick Lorenz and Edward Erickson. *The Euphrates Triangle: Security Implications of the Southeast Anatolia Project* (National Defense University Press, 1999), p. 47.

[2] UMUN, *The Water Conflict in the Euphrates and the Tigris: Scenario Background* (Uppsala: Uppsala Model United Nations, 2009), p. 5.

[3]Ecologically, this region of Turkey-Syria-Iraq comprises a unified area, the Tigris-Euphrates river system, which defines the Tigris-Euphrates (alluvial salt marsh) ecoregion of West Asia.

[4]http://www.reuters.com/article/environmentNews/idUSTRE54B3ZA20090512.

[5]http://www.gap.gov.tr/gap_eng.php?sayfa=English/Ggbilgi/gnedir.html.

[6]Ali Çarkoğlu, and Mine Eder," "Water Conflict: The Euphrates-Tigris Basin," "in Kemal Kirişci and Barry Rubin, eds., *Turkey in World Politics, An Emerging Regional Power* (Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2002), pp. 235-250, page 67.

[7]http://southasia.oneworld.net/globalheadlines/drought-takes-toll-on-ira....

[8]*Turkish Daily News*, January 5, 1996.

[9]http://docstalk.blogspot.com/2009/08/story-about-stealing-water.htmlş.

[10]http://www.mideastnews.com/water001.html.

[11]Over the last couple of years especially, an opening of diplomatic ties with Armenia has been initiated (for the first time in the history of the two countries), the border with Syria opened (also after a long history of tensions with roots going back to the founding period of the republic), and relations between Ankara and both the Kurdish north and Baghdad have improved greatly (again, for the first time in decades), with several visits back and forth between government heads.

[12]http://www.alarabonline.org/english/display.asp?fname=2009%5C09%5C0903%....htm&dismode=x&ts=03/09/2009%2012:13:03%20%C3%A3.

[13]http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jgOvqIhYsHmKvwAHvnoN....

[14] Carl Nestor, "The Southeast Anatolian Project (GAP) and Turkey's *Kurdish* Question: Part II," in *Interna tional Journal of Kurdish Studies,* 1996, Issue 1-2, pp. 35-78, page 67.

[15] See: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=33679.

[16] Nilay Özok, *Social Development as a Governmental Strategy in the Southern Anatolia Project*. M.Sc. thesis. Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History (Istanbul: Bogazici University, 2004), p. 4.

[17] A.W. Van den Ban, *Consultancy Report of the Role of Agricultural Extension in the Development of Ir rigated Agriculture in the GAP Region of Turkey*. Unpublished report, 2000.

[18] See: http://www.khrp.org/component/option,com_docman/task,doc_view/gid,203/I....

[19]http://www.wmf.org/watch/watch-sites-1996.

[20]http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=EN&reference=B6-....

[21]http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/envi_2009...envi_20090121_turkey_en.pdf.

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